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ABSTRACT

Rural education is finally gaining the attention it has been denied for so long. Slight gains, such as federal recognition, have been made. This has been a worldwide trend. A study of rural education conducted by the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development details the state of worldwide rural education in a fifteen point outline, with emphasis on finance, government, research, educational needs, equal education, teacher education, educational reform, school community relationships, student achievement, and governmental assistance. (SAS)

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Rocky Too: The Challenge of Rural Education in the 1980's

by Jonathan P. Sher

After years of governmental neglect, academic disdain and a legacy of poor leadership and self-doubt within the ranks, rural education is finally picking itself up off the canvas and battling for a place among the nation's priorities for the 1980s.

Tired of being treated like "just another bum from the neighborhood," the rural side of American education is training hard for a shot at restoring rural concerns to their rightful prominence on the local, state, national (and even international) policy agendas for the next decade. The first surprise is that it's happening at all. The second surprise is that it's likely to succeed.

This assumption of success is based on several realities, especially the fact that the "substantive case" for taking rural education seriously is a solid and compelling one. The foundation of this case is built upon the (surprising) size of the rural sector, i.e., the fact that approximately two-thirds of the nation's public school districts, one-half of the public schools, and one-third of the public school students are rural ones. Add to this base the statistics which show that since 1972 the old rural to urban migration trends have reversed (with more and more people moving into rural areas)--and it becomes obvious that the rural education constituency will be a substantial one for many years to come.

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Yet, it should be clearly understood that the case for rural education is by no means a strictly numerical one. Whether viewed from the perspective of the magnitude of problems to be solved or the extent to which educational excellence can be fostered among the nation's

rural schools, the recent research evidence makes it clear that this sector of American education merits far more attention and resources than has been accorded to it in recent years.

Complementing the substantive case is the happy coincidence that, politically, the rural education movement is both well-timed and in harmony with other important trends, not only within the profession, but also within the society as a whole. For example, the trends toward more balanced economic and population growth, toward increased rural community organizing in favor of rural schools and toward a heightened awareness of and support for cultural diversity (as well as trends away from the "one best system" and "bigger is better" models of education reform) all reinforce the political support engendered to date through the rural education movement.

Although this renewed assertiveness within the rural sector has only begun to emerge, cracks in the traditional wall of indifference surrounding rural education can already be seen. For example, until very recently the Federal government employed no one having a specific mandate to assist (or even keep track of) the nation's rural schools. Now, however, there are a handful of Federal officials having rural education-related responsibilities sprinkled among the National Institute of Education, the U.S. Department of Agriculture, and the U.S. Office of Education. Further, the legislation creating the new U.S. Department of Education explicitly directed that the Assistant Secretary for Vocational and Adult Education take responsibility for rural education matters.

This was the first Congressionally mandated recognition of and support for rural education in recent years. Despite the suspect placement with vocational education, this legislation at least removes

the grounds for the Federal bureaucracy's "It's not my job," attitude toward America's rural schools. All of this may amount to no more than tokenism, but it must be remembered first that even tokenism is a step up for rural education and that such treatment is a normal point along the road to more serious involvement.

It should be noted that these breakthroughs are not limited to government departments. For instance, there is now a rural "interest group" within the American Educational Research Association. Similarly, the National Rural Center has an active rural education program. Most recently, the head of the National School Boards Association publicly committed this key organization to a major push on behalf of rural education both within and beyond the NSBA itself. Important as each of these developments are in their own right, they are perhaps properly viewed as precursors of the rural movement's influence--as the first sprouts in a field that will come into full bloom during the 1980s.

Ironically, perhaps the most compelling reason for predicting a successful reemergence of rural education in the U.S. is that this revitalization process is not limited to the U.S. alone. Far from being an exception, the U.S. rural education movement is being closely paralleled by trends and activities in the other Western industrialized nations.

A three-year, twelve-nation study of "basic education and teacher support in sparsely populated areas" was recently completed by OECD's Center for Educational Research and Innovation. This international project generated fifteen major conclusions which both provide a capsule sketch of what's happened to date in rural education, and more important, a basis for developing sounder rural education policies

during the 1980s. The conclusions noted below are listed randomly and no priorities should be inferred.

CONCLUSION No. 1: THE PROVISION OF PRIMARY LEVEL BASIC EDUCATION IN RURAL AREAS IS NO LONGER A MAJOR PROBLEM IN MEMBER COUNTRIES

This is not to imply that small rural primary schools are without very real difficulties which need to be resolved. There continues to be ample room for improvement in most rural primary schools and governments should help foster such improvement wherever possible and appropriate. Rather, the point here is that, with rare exceptions, adequate opportunities to receive a basic primary level education in sparsely populated areas are available in the Member countries.

CONCLUSION No. 2: THE PROVISION OF SECONDARY LEVEL EDUCATION IN SPARSELY POPULATED AREAS CONTINUES TO BE A MAJOR PROBLEM

The problem of access to secondary level educational opportunities, although diminishing, is still a significant issue (particularly in the poorer OECD Member countries). Yet, there are two other major concerns which are prevalent in the participating countries:

(A) The quality of rural secondary schooling (particularly as reflected in the breadth and depth of curricular offerings and other educational opportunities) is still not consistently high; and

(B) The inappropriateness of some secondary level programs

(particularly in vocational education) and the shortcomings of conventional strategies for the delivery of rural secondary education (e.g., centralized facilities, boarding arrangements and/or long bus rides).

CONCLUSION No. 3: EFFECTIVE EQUALITY OF EDUCATIONAL OPPORTUNITY OFTEN DOES NOT EXIST FOR SPECIAL NEED POPULATIONS IN RURAL AREAS

Although significant strides have been made in recent years to improve the educational opportunities available to all rural students, the quality and appropriateness of opportunities available to some key rural populations continue to be deficient. The groups most frequently cited as being underserved or poorly served are:

(a) The children of indigenous (or native) populations in sparsely populated areas.

(b) The children of migrant agricultural workers.

(c) Girls and young women in rural areas.

(d) Gifted and talented children.

(e) Handicapped children.

CONCLUSION No. 4: RURAL TEACHER TRAINING AND SUPPORT MECHANISMS HAVE BEEN SIGNIFICANTLY IMPROVED IN RECENT YEARS

The era in which teachers working in sparsely populated areas were involuntarily isolated from sources of information and assistance has largely passed in the Member countries. However, there was ample evidence presented which indicates the need to create and/or expand both preservice and inservice teacher training which is <u>specifically tailored</u> to the needs and concerns of rural teachers.

CONCLUSION No. 5: THE ABILITY OF RURAL SCHOOLS TO ATTRACT AND RETAIN COMPETENT TEACHERS CAN ONLY BE PARTIALLY INFLUENCED BY POLICYMAKERS

Whether competent teachers come to and remain in sparsely populated areas is still largely a function of the teacher supply/demand ratio in a given country at a given time. Rural schools tend to be the prime beneficiaries of periods of teacher oversupply and the hardest hit during periods of teacher shortages. Another key determinant of teacher distribution in the profession and society as a whole in a particular country. The willingness of competent teachers to accept rural posts is likely to be far greater when such posts are widely regarded as desirable than it is when rural assignments are viewed as a personal and professional dead end. Despite these realities, there are certain concrete measures which governments can adopt to improve teacher distribution:

(A) Ensure that equal economic and professional opportunities exist for rural teachers.

(B) Begin an active effort to identify and recruit individuals aspiring to be rural teachers.

(C) Arrange for a greater proportion of student teachers to practice teach in rural settings.

(D) Improve the quality, availability and appropriateness of rural inservice education.

CONCLUSION No. 6: REFORMS WHICH INTENTIONALLY OR UNWITTINGLY SERVE TO "URBANIZE" RURAL EDUCATION ARE LIKELY TO HAVE NEGATIVE EFFECTS

In case after case, it can be demonstrated that the educational programs and curricula, reform strategies, and organizational

arrangements originally designed for and utilized by school systems in metropolitan areas are inappropriate in rural settings and rarely replicated successfully by rural schools. Clearly there is a pressing need to develop rural schools which reflect and build upon the unique opportunities and natural advantages inherent to them and their communities. Thus, rural schools could incorporate:

(A) A strong foundation in the teaching of basic skills and essential facts.
(B) An emphasis on practical skills and learning by doing.
(C) Training in self-directed study and the development of initiative.
(D) A focus on the local rural community.
(E) A commitment to familiarizing students with the outside world.
(F) An emphasis on the options available to rural youths both within and beyond the local community.

CONCLUSION No. 7: THE LINKS BETWEEN SCHOOLS AND COMMUNITIES IN SPARSELY POPULATED AREAS SHOULD BE EXPANDED AND THE BONDS BETWEEN THEM STRENGTHENED

Schools have been (and continue to be) absolutely vital as <u>community</u> institutions as well as educational ones in rural areas. Policies and reforms which restrict the links or weaken the bonds between the school and the community are highly counterproductive. In rural areas, schools <u>need</u> the community to supplement and extend their efforts while the community <u>needs</u> the school both as a source of community identity and as a reinforcement of the community's childrearing practices. This

active interdependence between community and school is one of the key attributes of rural education. Reforms which sacrifice this relationship have a markedly detrimental effect on all parties concerned.

CONCLUSION No. 8: STUDENT ACHIEVEMENT IN RURAL SCHOOLS DOES NOT APPEAR TO FALL SIGNIFICANTLY BELOW THAT OF URBAN STUDENTS

Two qualifications must be immediately addded to this conclusion: First, comprehensive and reliable data on the issue of student achievement is generally limited in the participating countries and missing altogether in some; and second, "average" levels of student achievement in both urban and rural areas fall well below desired levels. Still, there was general agreement (and a few pieces of supporting evidence) that once the effects of IQ and socio-economic status have been controlled, there are few major differences between urban and rural students in terms of academic achievement.

CONCLUSION No. 9: THERE ARE RELATIVELY HIGH COSTS INHERENT IN THE DELIVERY OF NEEDED EDUCATIONAL SERVICES IN SPARSELY POPULATED AREAS

The reality of high per pupil expenditures in rural schools offering an adequate program has not changed in recent years. Further, these costs are equally visible in centralized as well as decentralized rural schools and in alternative rural delivery systems as well as traditional ones. Population sparsity ensures that rural districts will have relatively high per pupil costs for transportation, specialized programs and services, administrative overhead, energy,

equipment and materials, and the maintenance and construction of school facilities. There are certain minimum fixed costs which schools must bear regardless of their enrollment. Having fewer students over which to spread these costs inevitably means that the per pupil cost will be higher in rural schools. Thus, higher costs which arise as a consequence of this sparsity must be regarded as one of the economic facts of rural life rather than as evidence of wastefulness or as costs which can be erased by stricter expenditure controls.

CONCLUSION No. 10: RURAL SCHOOLS HAVE BEEN ABLE TO REDUCE THEIR ECONOMIC BURDEN THROUGH THE UTILIZATION OF STRATEGIES UNIQUELY SUITED TO THE RURAL CONDITION

As previously noted, there are high costs associated with the delivery of rural educational services in any circumstance. This has been true even when the programs and services offered are not extensive by urban standards. Although a truism, it is important to note that the costs of providing exactly the same programs, materials, services, and resources in rural schools as are commonly found in urban schools (which coincides with some notions of "equal educational opportunity") would be so prohibitively high that even the wealthiest Member countries lack the necessary funds. Rural schools have been financially able to offer educational programs and services of at least reasonable breadth and quality by inaugurating such measures as:

(a) Sharing resources (human, material, and financial) with other schools.
(b) The utilization of extensive parental assistance and in-kind

contributions from the rural community.

(c) Hiring generalists who could perform multiple roles in the schools rather than hiring specialists.

(d) Promoting individualized instruction and independent study instead of extensive formal course offerings.

(e) Simply "doing without" sophisticated equipment and expensive facilities.

CONCLUSION No. 11: THERE IS NO SINGLE DEFINITION OF "RURAL" OR "SPARSELY POPULATED" EDUCATION WHICH IS MEANINGFUL IN AN INTERNATIONAL CONTEXT

Diversity is a central characteristic of rural communities both within and among participating countries. Given the enormous range of communities, people, and circumstances which are present in the sparsely populated of Member countries, the precise meaning of "ruralness" can be rather elusive. We know, of course, that rural communities are characterized by small populations and low population density ratios. However, since "rural" and "sparsely populated" are relative terms, all population and density based definitions are suggestive rather than absolute. A "sparsely populated" area in the English context implies something quite different than areas given the same label in Norway or Australia. Similarly, a rural school which would be small by U.S. standards would be rather large in the context of rural Finland. The point here is simply that "ruralness," like beauty, lies in the eye of the beholder. Therefore, each country's conception of the meaning of "rural" or "sparsely populated" should be respected and attempts to impose a more global definition resisted.

CONCLUSION No. 12: THE RURAL EDUCATION SECTOR IS LIKELY TO REMAIN AS A MAJOR CONSTITUENCY WITHIN THE EDUCATION SYSTEM OF MEMBER COUNTRIES

There are several trends and circumstances supporting this conclusion (which were discussed in some detail in Part I of this report). These include an alteration of rural to urban migration trends; pressures against centralization and standardization in education and other governmental services; dissatisfaction with conventional solutions to the educational problems of SPAs; renewed respect for rural educational models; and concerns about equal educational opportunity. However, one should not lose sight of the more fundamental reality that millions of children are dependent upon rural schools and rural delivery systems for their education during the compulsory years of schooling. By all indications, this fact will not change dramatically in the foreseeable future.

EDUCATION WILL OCCUR IN THE ABSENCE OF EXPLICIT AND APPROPRIATE GOVERNMENTAL POLICIES AND ASSISTANCE

The primacy of local circumstance and the value of local initiative must, of course, be remembered and respected. Reform strategies which seek to circumvent local traditions, values and capabilities (rather than building on them) are not likely to succeed. Still, it is equally apparent that rural schools have been, are, and doubtless will continue to be both dependent on governmental assistance and subject to governmental regulation and/or control. Thus, the willingness and ability of Member governments to exert leadership and act forcefully in

ways which enhance and strengthen education within their sparsely populated areas will have a profound effect on the long-term development of rural children and rural communities.

CONCLUSION No. 14: INNOVATIONS IN THE CONTENT AND DELIVERY OF RURAL EDUCATIONAL SERVICES ARE BOTH NECESSARY AND FEASIBLE

For years, the prevailing wisdom in education has been that rural communities and rural schools are so conservative and resistant to change that developing and supporting innovative educational strategies and programs was hardly worth the effort. The SPA project, particularly through the fourteen special reports previously described, provided a powerful refutation to this bit of conventional wisdom. In fact, there is considerable evidence that rural schools (once convinced of the merits of the proposed innovation) are remarkably able to implement new ideas and can serve as rather splendid laboratories for educational innovation.

CONCLUSION No. 15: THE CURRENT STATE OF RESEARCH, DATA COLLECTION, AND INFORMATION DISSEMINATION ABOUT RURAL EDUCATION IS NOT IMPRESSIVE AND MUST BE IMPROVED

In an age when people are seriously concerned about "information overloads," the paucity of reliable information and research on rural education is genuinely startling. In country after country, the most rudimentary data about rural schools, communities, students and teachers is simply not known and/or available. Much was learned through the efforts made by CERI's SPA project, but one of the most

lasting impressions on participants was the discovery of just how much more remains to be learned. Research, data collection, and information dissemination about rural education must be expanded and upgraded if policymakers are to have the evidence they need to make informed choices for the future.

As noted at the beginning, rural education in the U.S. (as well as internationally) is fighting for its proper place on the nation's policy agenda for the 1980s. Despite its underdog status, rural education has an excellent chance of winning this battle. After all, the rural education movement enters this fight not only with its own intrinsic strengths but also with an ability to invoke the nation's avowed commitment to educational equity of <u>all</u> children. With strength in the ring and support in the corner, it would be unwise to count out rural education's challenge in the 1980s.